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“Be Of Knightly Countenance”: Masculine Violence And Managing Affect In Late Medieval Alliterative Poetry And Batman: Under The Red Hood

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“BE OF KNIGHTLY COUNTENANCE”: MASCULINE VIOLENCE AND MANAGING
AFFECT IN LATE MEDIEVAL ALLITERATIVE POETRY AND *BATMAN: UNDER THE
RED HOOD*

by

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DEDICATION

For Aunt Cindy, Alicia, and Stacey, in memory of Danny, who was taken far too soon in circumstances which are far too normalized.

Also, for my nieces, Milah and Maislyn, and my younger sister Serenity, who were all born in a post-Columbine *and* post-9/11 America: this thesis is dedicated to you.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the legacy of cultural representations of masculine violence as it manifests in late medieval alliterative poetry and contemporary superhero comics, and the ways in which those manifestations are inflected by a particular set of images, motifs, and cultural underpinnings which transcend sociohistorical boundaries and that illuminate the ways culture sanctions certain forms of masculine violence. To understand how, as Patricia Ingham suggests in *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*, imagination infuses history towards particular “regime[s] of truth,” I argue that late fourteenth century Arthurian alliterative poetry and contemporary superhero comics instruct a literate populace on the linkages between violence, masculinity, and power, and the ways in which culture sanctions each of these concepts (Ingham 27). I argue that late medieval alliterative poetry—specifically the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—were particularly instructive for young men regarding situational awareness: the knowledge of when and how a man should act in similar—and yet distinctly different—situations, and that *Batman: Under the Red Hood* mobilizes similar instruction through explicit ethical thought experiments about how, when, and against whom it is appropriate for men to manifest affect through violence. Finally, this thesis argues that because all of these texts inevitably end in violent acts by men, that culturally we expect—and, I argue, require—men to manage affect through violence and that there is no other alternative available in masculine codes of behavior.

PREFACE

A recent *New York Times* article calls the current generation of high school students a “Mass Shooting Generation,” and I have often been told that the defining moment of my generation was on September 11, 2001 (Burch, Mazzei, and Healy n.p.). While I do remember where I was that day and my memories still ring clear in my own personal ethics, the attacks on September 11, 2001, are not what motivate this thesis, though its specters are inevitable in the development—and the writing—of it. The event that I have returned to over and over in the research and writing of this thesis is the shooting at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. I was eleven-years-old then, on the tail-end of middle childhood and just beginning to determine my own moral compass. I have no doubts that the proximity of 9/11 to Columbine in my own conscious memory—and, I would suggest, in a collective memory of people who stood on the sidelines, hundreds of miles away, watching and wondering, *How did this happen?*—contributed significantly to questions I have only begun to articulate in my adulthood.

The question “How did this happen?” is a valid one, and as debates over mental health and gun control have raged around it, it has become clear to me that there is no simple answer. A multitude of factors converge to produce any given moment in time, whether it results in the tree that falls in the forest with no one around to hear it or some other phenomenon, and often we seek causal explanations for many of those moments. *How did this happen?* The tree rotted and it could no longer support its own weight. *How*

did this happen? The tree contracted heart rot from a fungus that killed the inside of the tree. *How did this happen?* And so on. The natural world depends on these causal explanations. Even complex causal chains can eventually lead to an answer: *This is how it happened.*

Ethics, however, suggests that such causal chains may not be so simple, especially when the goal is to find something—or someone—to blame. In my career I have met with engineering students whose instructors walk them through tragedies—the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, bridge collapses, the nuclear disasters at Fukushima Daiichi and Chernobyl—for which there *are* productive causal chains (A led to B led to C), but which are so complex and parallel (A led to B led to C while D led to E led to F and the combinations of E, F, and B led to G) that there is, ultimately, no right answer. There is no *one* thing and no *one* person to blame. Cue the broadcast apology from whomever is held responsible and public frustration. Cue the question, *How did this happen?* But in mass shootings—and in other instances of excessive violence, the displacement of complex affect into violence—there *is* someone to blame. We *can* point a finger; there is a perpetrator. And yet the question remains, and splits into variants of the same:

How did he get in?

How did he arm himself?

How was he allowed to purchase a weapon?

How did no one see?

How did no one else know?

Surely, we must have known.

In analyzing a mass shooter's motivations, for instance, the causal chain is broken, it splits, and the series of fractured questions, paired with frustration, grief, and anger, eventually fizzle, and the dust settles until the next incident and the cycle starts again.

How did this happen?

In 1954, Frederic Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent* in which he posited (more-or-less) that comic books produced juvenile delinquents (Wertham 1-15). When faced with questions about juvenile delinquency and violence, Wertham's response was to point to a pop-culture medium and respond: *This is how it happened*. Prior to and in the wake of Columbine, psychologists and parents—and even our own current President—pointed to video games (Salam and Stack n.p.). My social media feeds are filled with virtual finger-pointing at various media: film, television, music. For many, it seems, the causal chain goes one way: popular media produces [insert disagreeable thing here]. And the response, from some, is similar to the response in reference to guns: media don't kill people; people kill people. While the hyperbole is obvious (if there is a universe in which media and weapons are equivalent in destructive power, it certainly is not this one), it is the ultimate logical conclusion of the attempt to locate blame for one person's actions in the media that person consumes. Eventually, media is substituted with culture, culture with family life, and the locus narrows until the only thing left to examine is the perpetrator himself and we have ultimately not reached an answer. I think that we still do not have a satisfactory answer for why two Columbine students killed 13 of their peers, or for any other instance of excessive masculine violence, though there are many voices which (sometimes valiantly) make the attempt.

While this thesis does not, by any means, attempt to answer questions specific to mass shootings in whole or in part, it does follow one correlation which is generally known: most mass shooters are men¹. While some might assume from this correlation that men are essentially violent, the connection is much more complex, and while I will not deal directly with the psychology of mass shooters *per se* in this thesis, I am interested in a related topic, one which may—at the very least—provide one way of looking at the causal chain which leads up to excessive masculine violence: the ways in which culture sanctions certain forms of masculine violence in certain circumstances. Instead of assuming that media *produces* violence in culture, this thesis posits that media *reflects* the types of violence which culture finds acceptable and the circumstances in which it is acceptable to mobilize violence as a viable expression of complex affect, and that this reflective process spans over 700 years of textual and visual imagery.

I take full responsibility for the implications of what is written in these pages, as this project, in the end, raises more questions than it answers (or even tries to answer). This thesis is only one component of a larger, ever-developing and ever-evolving personal philosophy, one in which I hope to understand my own complicity in the horrors that have/will/do affect(ed) those who come after me. We created this world, and we are always-already complicit in the ways in which violent acts resonate in how we live our lives. There is no easy answer in the face of mass violence; I only hope that the questions posed and explored herein offer some perspective for generating a more complex one.

¹ As of October 2017, 98% of mass shooters were men, as only three shooters since the University of Texas Clock Tower shooting in 1966 were women. See Filipovic.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AMA</i>	<i>Alliterative Morte Arthure</i>
<i>SGGK</i>	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>

CHAPTER 1

“BE KNIGHTLY OF COUNTENANCE”: MASCULINE VIOLENCE AND MANAGING AFFECT IN LATE MEDIEVAL ALLITERATIVE POETRY AND

BATMAN: UNDER THE RED HOOD

INTRODUCTION

In the preface to *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Carolyn Dinshaw quotes Dipesh Chakrabarty in a manner that encompasses the underlying assumptions of this thesis: “Pasts *are* there in taste, in practices of embodiment, *in the cultural training the senses have received over generations*” (Chakrabarty qtd. in Dinshaw xii, emphasis added). Chakrabarty’s notion of the ever-presence of the past in the present, especially in “cultural training” which transcends traditional, linear conceptions of time, aptly describes the ways in which we might understand how current understandings and cultural representations of masculine violence are inflected by—and reflective of—medieval chivalric traditions. As with most histories, the history of violence involves texts and images and is evident in the media we have circulated for centuries, and that we continue to circulate today. The history of masculine violence comprises a significant portion of this legacy which is legible in various forms of cultural production including late medieval chivalric literature and superhero comics. But to use the term “history” is to assume a particular trajectory, one which reads contemporary conceptions of masculine violence as somehow descended from or indebted to the representations of masculine violence which preceded them.

While this is one method of understanding the cultural training manifested in contemporary cultural productions, I argue that these contemporary texts simultaneously inflect and contribute to our current cultural conceptions of the masculine violence of the past.

Therefore, this thesis is concerned with the legacy of cultural representations of masculine violence as it manifests in late medieval alliterative poetry and contemporary superhero comics, and how those manifestations are inflected by a particular set of images, motifs, and cultural underpinnings which transcend sociohistorical boundaries and which illuminate how culture sanctions certain forms of masculine violence. In considering the parallels between these representations—which are strikingly similar for being over six hundred years removed from each other—I argue that these conceptions of masculine violence inform one another by illuminating the myriad and complex ways in which cultural productions dialogue with one another through a literate populace, with that populace as the conduit through which we might understand the conversation “happening” in the first place. My own understanding of late medieval chivalric poetry and superhero comics as “parallel,” for example, is dependent on my exposure to both, an exposure which the late medieval poets in question certainly did not experience, and which the various men involved in the production of the comics examined here may or may not have experienced.

I have therefore not oriented this argument around a singular culture for various reasons, namely because this thesis is cross-temporal and intercultural and examines texts from twenty-first century American popular culture alongside late medieval English chivalric literature, drawing parallels between formal methods and cultural

representations. Thus, “culture” in the context of this thesis denotes an unspecified social environment; while this definition will, for some, be significantly problematic, the goal of this project is to locate and analyze the parallels between discrete cultures, which requires suspension of boundaries between socio-historical contexts in order to develop its hermeneutics, which are suspicious of the isolation of products and phenomena to specific contexts. Further, to understand how, as Patricia Ingham suggests in *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*, imagination infuses history towards particular “regime[s] of truth,” I argue that late fourteenth century Arthurian alliterative poetry and contemporary superhero comics instruct a literate populace on the links between violence, masculinity, and power, and how culture sanctions each of these concepts (Ingham 27). Further, I argue that late medieval alliterative poetry—specifically the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—were particularly instructive for young men regarding situational awareness: the knowledge of when and how a man should act in similar—and yet distinctly different—situations, and that *Batman: Under the Red Hood* mobilizes similar instruction through explicit ethical thought experiments about how, when, and against whom it is appropriate for men to manifest affect through violence.

These texts are forms that I view as roughly equivalent to one another as “popular culture” media; that is, they are media types which are or were widely circulated through various means to a literate populace. I further categorize these types as “imagetexts” which depend on the fusion of visual and textual material of varying types to produce meaning. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W. J. T. Mitchell theorizes the “imagetext,” and argues that “[t]he dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in

the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself” (Mitchell 43). In *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England*, Jessica Brantley applies the term “imagetext,” defined as an “insistent combination of words and pictures,” in a reading of Carthusian devotional imagetexts (Brantley 5). While also helping to classify various performative combinations of image, visibility, and text in late medieval affective literature, the term “imagetext” immediately queues up an extended legacy of comics as the most blatant modern form of imagetext, especially given that one of the defining factors of imagetext is the inextricable dependence of image and text on one another in order to create meaning. While I will not be dealing with Brantley’s reading of Carthusian devotional imagetexts in depth or elaborating on W. J. T. Mitchell’s introduction of the term, I will be using “imagetext” throughout this thesis to refer to the primary texts it examines for their broadly hybrid visual and textual nature.

Like Mitchell, we must consider how texts that are *purely words* (as the alliterative poems considered here are) operate as imagetexts. In *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*, Sarah Stanbury presents one answer via Nicholas Love’s version of imagination:

“Ymaginacion,” as a noun, is the faculty by which we are to visualize Christ’s life—through processes of ‘ymagining’ or ‘beholding,’ verbals that both describe acts of mental picturing. In a guided meditation, the narrator places us close to the scenes we are watching and then sets them in motion, creating not a set of *tableaux vivants* but a dramatic reenactment. (172, emphasis in original)

The same way that an imagetext creates interdependence between—and a conflation of—image and text, Stanbury posits that Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*

moderates a similar, synesthetic experience for the reader, conjuring images and drama where there physically are none. The “mental picturing” that Stanbury finds in Love’s *Mirror* operates in ways similar to alliterative poetry and modern comics, the two forms that are classified here as imagetexts for the interdependence of the visual and the textual in order to create a cohesive whole. Stanbury classifies the act of mental picturing as participatory (177), and the participatory nature of the performance required of late medieval images and texts muddles the distinction between “images” (objects) and “imagining” (an action performed by a subject).

These imagetexts all portray what I call “masculine violence,” which is shorthand for violence which men enact on property, people, etc., especially as a manifestation of complex and unarticulated affect. “Affect” is distinct from emotion but carries some of the same connotations. While various affect theorists define “affect” differently, here it denotes pre- and unarticulated psycho/somatic responses; the articulation of a feeling or response (“fear,” “anger,” etc.) I have opted to call “emotion.” While this thesis will deal with both in somewhat equal measure, one significant aspect of the texts I analyze here is the absence of articulated responses (“emotions”) in certain circumstances which nevertheless result in violence. I argue that these instances are moments in which violence has effectively displaced affect, and that they demonstrate the types of masculine violence which culture permits or sanctions. I have chosen to call this process “unarticulated sanctioning,” as opposed to those sanctions which are explicitly articulated. The imagetexts I analyze here reflect the types of masculine violence culture sanctions without expressed articulation, and the circumstances in which culture accepts such violence. These two aspects of these texts reflect the ways in which culture accepts

substitutions for a man's ability to articulate complex affect: *Instead of attempting to use language to articulate your response, you may use this method instead*. This argument is, finally, about gender, and the ways in which culture permits specific avenues for articulating affect for men and not women, while simultaneously allowing men to ignore—or cutting men off entirely from—the avenues available to women for articulating affect.

THE SUBJECT/OBJECT INVERSIONS OF CULTURAL IMAGETEXTS

I find the texts analyzed here to be exemplary cultural productions, demonstrative of the types of popular media at issue here in both late medieval and in twenty-first century culture. Stanbury argues for late medieval devotional imagery as social objects, an argument that is of great use in simultaneously considering fourteenth century alliterative poetry and superhero comics as cultural representations of masculine violence. For Stanbury, these social objects operate in a “culture of the spectacle” (Stanbury 5), “work as agents in the service of systems of authority” (16), and “[connect] us bodily” to the ideas behind the images in question (22). Stanbury's argument is compelling in that it utilizes late medieval thought on optics to unveil the ways in which affective images and texts operated in late medieval England, thought that easily translates to a reading of contemporary comics (6). For Stanbury, sight is “a property of visual contiguity” (6). “Images,” she says, “. . . literally touch us, linking us physically with them” (6). Stanbury's model represents the reader/viewer as *subject* and the image/text (imagetext) as *object*, yet she argues that “[the] act of participation” that images or texts provide “blur[s] the boundaries between images and imagining” (177).

For her part, Stanbury does address the ways in which affective objects act on their subjects—i.e., “the text feminizes its spectators” (184)—but the argument largely maintains the image/viewer, object/subject distinction. The performative nature of imagetexts such as alliterative poetry or comics complicate Stanbury’s model of the visual object, especially considering Brian Massumi’s inversion of the object into subject and subject into object in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Massumi uses a sports metaphor to explain the ways in which things we traditionally think of as objects are in fact subjects: “The ball moves the players. *The player is the object of the ball*. . . . the ball must be considered in some way an autonomous actor When the ball moves, the whole game moves with it” (Massumi 73, emphasis in original). While the entire analogy is lengthy and somewhat unwieldy, the end result is that the ball of a sport (traditionally considered an object because it is acted upon by the players of the game) becomes the *subject* of play (72-4). The inversion is predicated on what dictates the action of the players, and thus raises the question of who—or what—is in control in any given situation. Alongside an inversion of subject and object, Massumi also postulates the ways in which an individual is “defined by its ‘positioning’ within [an] intersubjective frame” (Massumi 68). While Massumi is dealing with the positioning of individuals relative to societies, in terms of late medieval and modern imagetexts, his method of positioning is useful in considering the relation of individual elements of imagetexts to both their larger structures and the contexts in which they exist. In *Suspended Animation: Pain, Punishment & Pleasure in Medieval Culture*, Robert Mills articulates a similar “assumption” thus: “medieval art . . . possessed constitutive functions, shaping as well as reflecting social and psychic existences” (Mills 10).

Similarly, Daniel Worden's "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect" deals with comics as a site for cultural commonplace (Worden 893). Building on Michael Warner's work on "the public as a circular notion," Worden suggests that the circulation of a text "can produce a distinct public," and that such a result is dependent on an object's reality "as a social entity" (893). Worden ultimately suggests that comics are cultural sites for affective readings and political negotiations, processes which I argue are at the center of understanding the legacy of masculine violence across these texts. The process of learning to be a man in the medieval period was no more clear-cut than it is today, and cultural products such as chivalric literature and superhero comics help facilitate that process in various ways. Learning to be a man—or, more specifically, learning to be a knight—was an extended process, and adolescence for most men in the late middle ages often extended far later than we expect in contemporary American culture (Neal 20, Karras 11-16). In *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, Ruth Mazo Karras suggests that during adolescence, a young man learned "the behavior expected of him by his peers and that expected of him by his lord and the civil authorities," and this process was facilitated in a number of ways, up to and including conduct and chivalric literature (Karras 39). The "ethos" of knightly behavior, according to Karras, "was to a large extent created by chivalric literature," which suggests that it is worth a close examination of chivalric literature to more fully understand the rules defined by the literature, and the ways in which it mobilizes the conventions of conduct literature at the same time that it manifests a wish fulfillment fantasy (Neal 51).

Derek G. Neal's assessment of chivalric literature as fantastical, unconscious "dreams" parallels his readings of legal documents; in *The Masculine Self in Medieval England*, Neal refers to "recent scholarly opinion [which] has emphasized a healthy suspicion toward legal documents" due to a lack of evidence demonstrating that these documents are, in fact, non-fiction (29). Legal documents, Neal suggests, are no more reliable in their depictions of "real," lived experience in the late Middle Ages than chivalric literature. Given Karras' insistence on the similarities between chivalric literature and the biographies and chronicles of "real" knights, we might ask which influenced which: were the biographies influenced by chivalric literature, or was chivalric literature influenced by the lives and practices of real knights? It could be that both are true. Regardless, the links between the recorded lives of real knights and chivalric literature suggest that chivalric literature in itself is a significant source of understanding how men were expected to act, and, I argue, how they learned how to act in the first place. By extension, what is expected is—ostensibly—synonymous with what is acceptable, thus such cultural productions will similarly educate a literate populace on the realities of acceptable masculine behavior as well.

IMAGETEXT AS CULTURAL INSTRUCTION

The preface to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* paints the text as a pedagogical tool. The poet invokes a holy muse, asking that God "Sheld us fro shamesdeed [shameful deeds] / and sinful workes // And give us grace to giue [guide] / and govern us here // In this wretched world, / through virtuous living" and that God "wisse me to warp out [teach; utter] / some word at this time // That nother void be ne vain [neither negate God's

teaching nor be in vain] / but worship til Himselfen [but honor Him] // *Plesand and profitable [pleasing] / to the pople that them heres [hear these words]*” (*AMA* ll. 3-5, 9-11, emphasis added). The plea that God allow the work to be instructive (“Plesand and profitable”) to its audience (“the pople that them heres”) illuminates the medieval conception that chivalric literature sometimes mobilized conventions of conduct literature. Immediately following, the poet presents the poem to follow as “a tale / that is trew [true] and noble,” a story that the audience is to understand as something that actually happened. Real places and chivalric practices are woven in with fictional knights and campaigns, further indicating the medieval conception of history as something fundamentally colored by legend (“fiction” or “fantasy”). These premises are the groundwork for understanding the poem as instructive—or at the very least reflective of the types of instruction valuable in late medieval England—and will lead us to a better understanding of both the ways in which audiences “learn” from their literary experiences, and the types of “knowledge” they gain. For the purposes of this project, it is worth pointing out that nearly one third of the poem’s lines are dedicated to descriptions of battle, themselves full of elaborations on specific knights’ battle prowess.² Learning to be a knight in this poem is thus largely dependent on visualizations of active knightly behavior, visualizations which we might understand (and which Neal seems to) as fantasies of “right” masculine conduct.

Reading across these texts as fantastical interventions into adolescent masculine conduct suggests that variations in circumstances—and variations in reacting to them—require that an audience understand the proper deportment of knights as operating on a

² Approximately 1,359 of 4,346 lines in the *AMA*: ll. 1104-1155; 1346-1394; 1457-1505; 1753-1881; 2016-2267; 2541-2573; 2572-3000; 3724-3896; and 4060-4261 all depict battle scenes.

spectrum determined by a knight's current circumstances. Right reactions for a knight require that he carefully assess a situation and adjust his conduct accordingly. Further, understanding the ways in which men learned to navigate their circumstances through chivalric literature suggests that Ingham's thesis regarding the ways in which fantasy and "real" experience merge to produce a history "thought to be materially true" is likewise true of conduct instruction for young men, both in the late Middle Ages and today (Ingham 27). To learn to be a man in both contexts is to consume its cultural productions and internalize their lessons. This process requires a complex series of heuristics in which men analyze and decode situations in order to determine right behavior, developing a set of ethics based on circumstances, actions, and reactions. Aidan Diamond's *"It's a Batman's World": Regulations of Gender, Sanity, and Justice in Batman Comics, 1986-2011* is one of the few works which deal with *Batman: Under the Red Hood* in its original printed medium, and one of the few works to take Jason Todd's ethics seriously, especially the ways in which Jason critiques "Batman's methods, focusing especially on the ways in which Batman's system of justice and punishment fails" (Diamond 17). Jason concludes, as Diamond notes, that not all criminals deserve the same fate because not all crime is equal. Jason's ability to critique Batman's ethics and to differentiate the Joker's behavior from other criminals' is evidence of his ability to enact a circumstantial spectrum similar to that found in chivalric literature, and especially in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

Other critics write Jason off as morally defunct without fully considering the ways in which he maneuvers through a series of complex heuristics out of which he develops a traditionally anti-heroic ethics. In *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*,

for instance, Travis Langley “diagnoses” Jason’s behavior as symptomatic of a number of various psychological categories, including conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder, thus formally dismissing Jason’s behavior as essential elements of his personality without considering when, where, and *from whom* he might have learned to act in various situations (Langley 202-205). Barring post-traumatic stress disorder—which more-or-less accurately categorizes Jason’s response to death, resurrection, and clawing himself out of his own grave³—Langley’s diagnoses represent an awfully convenient method of condemning anti-heroic behavior while simultaneously absolving Bruce Wayne of any responsibility in Jason’s development leading up to *Batman: Under the Red Hood*. James DiGiovanna’s “Is It Right to Make a Robin?” casts Jason’s behavior in a similar light: “Jason had the virtue of courage, but he also had the vices of harshness and rashness. He took delight in roughing up villains and made many impetuous decisions that put Batman and himself in danger” (DiGiovanna 24). DiGiovanna follows the logic where Langley does not, pointing to Batman’s influence on Jason, but ultimately concludes that there is something essential to Jason’s character that Bruce was unable to change: “Batman failed [in Jason’s ethical training] in two ways: . . . in providing moderating virtues, and . . . in changing the underlying character of his young ward” (24). Drawing from Diamond’s thesis and considering the ways in which chivalric literature demonstrates the ways in which men learn from other men—and from cultural products—I argue that Jason’s violent behavior is not a manifestation of some essential character flaw, but a logical conclusion (one of many possibilities) of the types of heuristics demonstrated in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Alliterative

³ See *Red Hood: Lost Days*.

Morte Arthure. Further, I argue that this conclusion is a manifestation of Jason's understanding of "right" masculinity based on his experiences learning from and interacting with other men.

A similar understanding of right masculinity in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is established early: nobility, courtesy, and war-making all lead to chivalry which overcomes "lithere⁴," the "type" of masculinity the poet associates with Lucius (*AMA* ll. 12-47). Thus, we are to pay close attention to Arthur and the other Round Table knights, as they are the poem's gold standard for proper masculinity. Similarly, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bertilak's household expects to learn something from Gawain when he arrives at Christmas time:

God hatz geuen vus His grace godly forsope,
þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue
When burneze blyþe of His burþe schal sitte
And synge.

In menyng of mannerez mere
þis burne now schal vus bryng.
I hope þat many hym here

Schal lerne of luf-talking. (*SGGK* ll. 920-927)

(God has truly given us His grace that He grants us such as Gawain to have as a guest when barons cheerful at His birth [Christmas] shall sit and sing with us. To purpose of manners shall this man now bring us. I hope that many of those here shall learn of love-talking.)

⁴ wickedness; The poet tells us that the knights of the Round Table slew "Lucius the lithere," or "Lucius the wicked" (ll. 17-23).

Bertilak's household celebrates the blessing God has given them in sending Gawain and anticipates learning from Gawain simply through his every day deportment. In sitting and singing (ll. 922-3) with Gawain, they expect to "lerne of luf-talking" (l. 927). Being in proximity to Gawain at all provides significant instruction in courtly demeanor, suggesting that experience *around* a knight amounts to being taught *by* that knight.

Unfortunately for Bertilak's household, however, Gawain does not think of himself as someone worth emulating: "And oþer ful much of oþer folk fongen hor dedez; / Bot þe daynté þat þey delen for my disert nys euer— / Hit is þe worchyp of yourself, þat noȝt bot wel connez" ("And there are many others to undertake her deeds; but the regard that they deal is indeed not for my merit—it is the praise of yourself that is nothing if not well positioned," ll. 1265-7). Gawain references the practice of learning from one's peers, and suggests that it is Bertilak, not himself, from whom Bertilak's men should be learning.

Thus the poem suggests that men should be wary of the company they keep, and the peers that they choose to emulate. While some instances of chivalric behavior seem to undercut others—for instance, in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* Arthur treats the Roman envoy kindly when they first arrive at Camelot (*AMA* ll. 166-219), but his hospitality precedes a sinister threat: they may take whatever route they like to Sandwich within seven days, should travel from Sandwich by Watling Street and none other, and ensure they are out of the country within eighteen days, for which Arthur assures their safety; anything more than eighteen days means a gruesome death (ll. 444-466)—we are to understand these moves as aspects of the same chivalric code. Violence and mercy go hand-in-hand and are meted out according to certain circumstances which are instructive

in themselves, and which men can learn from proximity to other men, though not necessarily from proximity to violence in itself.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is unique among these texts in that its violence manifests against a backdrop of peace and celebration. Bertilak arrives at Camelot with the pretense of entertainment, which is ultimately the spectacle of violence. Eventually it is to Gawain's shame that he is unable to play the game as laid out in each of the four wagers to which he agrees⁵, and ultimately his shame is marked by his unwillingness to face the masculine violence to which he has agreed without flinching. It is the flinch itself—compounded with Gawain's deceit in taking and refusing to announce his possession of the green girdle—which is the manifestation of Gawain's cowardice. When the Green Knight's axe falls towards Gawain's neck the first time, Gawain "schranke a lytle with þe shulderes for þe scharp yrne" ("shrank a little with the shoulders because of the sharp iron," *SGGK* l. 2267) and is scolded for his unwillingness to follow through with the violence to which he committed himself. Like the lady's accusations in retaliation to Gawain's unwillingness to consent to her seductions⁶, the Green Knight ties his admonishment to Gawain's reputation as a role model for chivalry:

‘Pou art not Gawayne,’ quop þe gome, ‘þat is so goud halden,

þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale,

And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!

⁵ In *SGGK* ll. 377-397, Gawain reiterates the terms of the overarching agreement of the game according to Bertilak's request: "þat bede þe þis buffet (quatso bifallez after) / And at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe anoþer / Wyth what weppen so þou wilt—and wyth no wyȝ ellez / On lyue." ("That prayerful be this feast (whatever happens after) and at this time a year from now you will take another blow with that weapon so you will—and with no means else"). Lines 1089-1112, 1404-1409, and 1676-1683 feature the following wagers Gawain makes with Bertilak without knowing that Bertilak and the Green Knight are one and the same, thus affecting his original wager and contributing to his cowardice in the culmination of the game in ll. 2257-2388.

⁶ See *SGGK* ll. 1292-1304, 1480-1503, 1508-1534, and 1779-1787.

Such cowardice of þat knyȝt cowte I neuer here.

Nawþer fyked I ne flaze, freke, quen þou myntest,

Ne kest no kaulacion in kynges hous Arthor. (ll. 2270-2275)

(‘You are not Gawain,’ said the man, ‘that is called so good, that never grew faint neither here nor by hill nor by vale, and now you flee for fear or else you be harmed! Such cowardice of that knight could I never hear. Neither did I flee quickly, man, when you intended, nor cast no cavillation⁷ in the house of King Arthur.)

Though the masculine violence of this poem originates in entertainment, it is ultimately tied to proper codes of chivalry and right masculinity, codes which Gawain consistently violates despite his anxieties about how others will perceive his behavior. Gawain is, ironically, willing to enact violence on another man, as he actively beheads the Green Knight in lines 416-443, but he is unwilling to face the violence to which he has subjected himself, demonstrating himself as less chivalrous than others have perceived Gawain to be through hearsay and proximate interactions. This use of violence as spectacle and as impetus for demonstrating Gawain’s lack of right masculine chivalric attitude in certain circumstances simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which Gawain is comfortable enacting and being subjected to masculine violence, and the conflict between subjective desire (i.e., the desire not to die) and a right, masculine chivalric code in which men face death and mobilize violence without flinching.

⁷ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “cavilling” is “[t]he making of captious, frivolous, quibbling, or unfair objections, arguments, or charges, in legal proceedings; the use of legal quibbles, or taking advantage of technical flaws, so as to overreach or defraud; hence, chicanery, trickery, overreaching sophistry.”

In true chivalric fashion, then, Jason Todd unflinchingly mobilizes violence in a variety of ways throughout *Batman: Under the Red Hood*, usually in displays of or bids for power, and quite frequently in ways which we might describe as spectacular. Jason introduces himself to Gotham’s underworld with an AK-47 and a bag full of the decapitated heads of 8 drug-trade lieutenants, demanding to run the trade and 40 percent of the profits with the qualification that there be “no dealing to *children*” (Winick and Mahnke 25; see Figure 1.1). Later Jason briefly teams up with Onyx to “kick *nine kinds* of hell out of [a] small gaggle of *dirtbags*” and later pins her with a knife through her shoulder to a wall (139, 149; see Figure 1.2). Jason is further prone to property damage with a penchant for explosives, destroying property roughly five times (47, 105, 207, 214, 277), with incidental property damage resulting from many of his exploits throughout *Under the Red Hood*. But in this way, he is not much different from Batman himself; aside from killing, Bruce is no stranger to brutal and sometimes torturous methods for dealing with criminals, and the property that Jason intentionally damages either houses criminals or contains black-market items. The marked difference that the text draws between Jason’s brand of violence and Bruce’s—vocalized by Alfred, Onyx, and Bruce—is that it is excessive.



Figure 1.1 – Jason introduces himself to Gotham’s underworld carrying a bag of decapitated heads



Figure 1.2 - Jason pins Onyx with a blade through her shoulder

AFFECTIVE BOUNDARIES AND EXCESSIVE MASCULINE VIOLENCE

To suggest that acts of violence might be “excessive” is to gesture towards the “boundaries” of masculine affect. These cultural products suggest that within the capacity for masculine affect there exists an allowance for certain types or gradations of violence, but that there are boundaries which masculine violence should not cross. These boundaries are, however, unclear and dependent on situational awareness and discretion. While there is no clear definition of the boundaries between sanctioned and excessive violence in *Under the Red Hood*, there are clear indications that Jason exceeds the mark, and that even as a child he demonstrated excessively violent tendencies. Upon learning

that Jason is still alive, Alfred reminisces on his time as Robin, providing perspective on Jason's childhood with Bruce and past examples of Jason's excessive behavior. Alfred says that over Jason's time with Bruce "[t]he world got a bit darker. Darker on the outside. And darker from within. To survive, some must get tougher. *And others merely remember what they once were*" (192-193, emphasis added). Following the implication that Jason has reverted to a formerly violent nature is a panel demonstrating Jason's excessively violent behavior (193; see Figure 1.3). Instead of simply incapacitating a criminal, Jason shatters his collarbone, for which Bruce scolds him: "There were at least



Figure 1.3 – Jason breaks a man's collarbone in a violent display as Robin

ten different ways you could have ended that—none of them had to involve that kind of damage" (194). Alfred explains that the incident "was the first time" and that "[t]here would be others... much more severe examples" (194). Alfred ultimately attributes Jason's excessive violence to a "mean streak" and condemns a child to a future of violent behavior, ignoring that that same child was trained by a man skilled in excessively violent methods but ostensibly cognizant of his own ethical boundaries; "Jason was," on

the other hand, “dangerous” (195). But Alfred is not the only one to articulate the excessive nature of Jason’s violence.

Onyx similarly accuses Jason of taking things too far in their team-up, and her accusation affords Jason an opportunity to explain that the real world does not tolerate such boundaries, and that idealism does not produce results. Towards the end of their partnership, Jason locates an automatic weapon and opens fire to end the fight (147; see Figure 1.4). Onyx calls for him to stop and asks him what he is doing, to which Jason



Figure 1.4 – Jason uses an automatic weapon to end a fight

responds, “What do you *think* I’m doing?” (148). Jason explains his perspective on the situation and outlines the naïveté of the position Batman and Onyx take in their vigilante pursuits: “What do you think this was all about?” he asks, “We were going to *rough* these guys up and teach them a *lesson*? Welcome to *planet Earth*, baby! These dead sacks of *meat* on the floor made their *living* by beating, raping and *devouring*! *Fear* isn’t the

answer!” (148). This confrontation is what provokes Jason to pin Onyx to a wall, and it is worth paying close attention to Jason’s language as he speaks to his captive audience:

Looks like it’s *gotta* hurt. Well, I say that like I’m speculating or something... I *know* it hurts. It wasn’t an accident that I went for the shoulder. I saw you favoring one side. You had a shoulder injury not too long ago... Maybe you came back too soon? Stop struggling. That knife isn’t coming out of that wall. Not at the angle you’re at. . . . Choice time. I can pull that knife out and you can run as fast as you can. *Or* I can pull that blade down all the way from your shoulder to your hip. It’ll hurt like fire for about fifteen seconds, then you’ll be dead from blood loss... (153-155)

Not only has Jason physically incapacitated Onyx, but he has done so in a particularly brutal manner, locating an obvious weakness and exploiting it to inflict the most damage. Further, he has incapacitated her in such a way as to control her (“Stop struggling.”) and threatened to eviscerate her (“I can pull that blade down all the way from your shoulder to your hip.”). When he finally releases her, Jason is still ready to “beat the hell out of” her, as if he has not caused enough damage and gotten his point across (156). Jason is similarly prone to waxing poetic about violence, especially shoulder wounds. “You know what I *love* about shoulder wounds?” he asks the Joker, “*One*, they really hurt. *Two*, they can bleed you out and you’ll be dead in minutes. *Three*, they really hurt. And *four*, they’re easy to patch” (282). In alignment with Alfred’s assessment of Jason’s character, we should note the extent to which Jason calculates his violent maneuvers, choosing them for specific effects and mobilizing the most devastating types. Shattering a collarbone to inflict the most damage or stabbing someone in the shoulder because of how easy it is to

kill (or save) someone with a shoulder wound qualify—for other characters—as excessive violence. But we would be wrong to assume that Jason is *naturally* inclined towards such behavior, as Alfred would, as even Bruce himself admits his own violent desires (307-308). I would argue that Black Mask actually articulates the reasoning behind Jason’s penchant for excessively violent methods, if in a roundabout manner:

Bit by bit, the *Red Hood* has been *taking* our trade. He’s *grabbed* our territory, *destroyed* our goods, and *killed* our people. And, now—*now*—he’s coming after me! *Me!* Everyone in this town *knows* that Gotham is under *my* control—*my* command—except *this* guy! This ends *now*. Tonight. He wants to take a shot at *the man*—fine. He had his chance. He *missed*. Fun time’s *over*. He’s *dead*. I want his beaten, mutilated corpse ground up in front of me. I want to eat his heart and break my foot off in his empty rib cage. (217)

Black Mask’s response to losing control of Gotham is to resort to excessively violent methods, thus displacing the complex affect in response to a loss of power with violent behavior. It is not enough for Jason to *just* die; he must die brutally, “mutilated” and “ground up.” Later Black Mask clarifies just how dead he wants Jason: “I mean the *big* kind of dead. *Serious* dead. Head on a pike, guts on the pavement, me wearing a sweatervest made of his skin kind of dead” (224). Excessive violence, for the Black Mask, is political, and operates as a particular type of political maneuver, through which power is usurped and maintained. Jason’s destruction of Black Mask’s goods (47, 105, 207, 214, 277) is just this type of move, and Black Mask deals with Jason in kind. Violence begets violence in Gotham’s criminal underworld.

Late medieval culture seems to have understood the cycle of masculine violence in similar terms, mobilizing violence and provoking others to violent acts in order to take and maintain power. Throughout the Round Table council early in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the knights and kings make calculated suggestions for how Arthur should respond to Lucius, the most notable being the suggestion that Arthur provoke *Lucius* to start a war (ll. 243-406). Cador appears predisposed to war, a pastime it seems he has missed in the past:

I was abashed, by our Lord, / of our best bernes, [men]

For grete dole of deffuse [period of prohibition] / of deedes of armes.

Now wakenes the war! / Worshipped be Crist!

And we shall win it again / by wightness [bravery] and strength! (*AMA* ll. 255-258)

Arthur chastises Cador for jumping straight to thoughts of war without considering the political implications of doing so, while also recognizing that if he does not act, he will disgrace his lineage (ll. 269-287). This juxtaposition exposes the different motivations behind political power in the poem: Cador desires war but does not consider the implications of instigating violence; Arthur desires peace but argues that Rome is not in a position to make demands and knows that he must respond to Lucius' summons in one way or another: he must submit or he must fight. Ultimately his message to Lucius delineates where and when Lucius can find him, and that if he wants tribute, he will have to fight for it (ll. 419-444).

Though the end result of Arthur's decision is the war Cador desires, Cador fails to internalize the lesson Arthur attempts to teach him. Later Arthur similarly rebukes Cador

for unwisely engaging in a battle in which several knights were lost: “Sir Cador, thy corage / confoundes us all! // Cowardly thou castes out / all my best knightes! // To put men in peril, / it is no pris [praise] holden,” (ll. 1922-4). Cador’s response seems to teach Arthur something in turn:

“Sir,” says Sir Cador, / “ye know well yourselven; [yourself]

Ye are king in this kith; / carp [say] what you likes!

Shall never bern [man] upbraid me / that to thy borde longes, [table, e.g., the Round Table]

That I sholde blinne [cease] for their boste [boast] / thy bidding to work!

. . .

I did my diligence today / —I do me on lordes—

And in daunger of dede / for diverse knightes,

I have no grace to thy gree [rank] / but such grete words[.]” (ll. 1930-1, 1934-6)

That Arthur responds in deference to what Cador has said despite his anger (“Though Sir Arthur was angered, / he answers fair,” l. 1938) suggests that it is sometimes appropriate to rebuke a rebuke, instead of displacing the anger it causes into violent behavior.

Cador’s and Arthur’s anger in front of the court demonstrates what seems to be normal courtly discourse, which suggests that even in front of one’s peers and superiors, there are right and wrong ways to manage one’s emotions. Responding to rebuke is one method; mourning is another, but instances of mourning are properly accompanied by violent behavior.

“BE OF KNIGHTLY COUNTENANCE”: MANHOOD AND MOURNING

Reminding men to “be of knightly countenance” is the refrain of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, but it resonates most when Arthur’s knights rebuke him for the way he mourns Gawain. Learning to mourn from the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a matter of discerning the proper arenas and methods of mourning. There are four total mourning scenes in the poem, three of which seem to demonstrate “right” reactions to a comrade’s death, while the fourth demonstrates what *not* to do. After the deaths of Berille, Kayous, and Chastelayne, Cador, Arthur, and Gawain (respectively) react through violence in battle (*AMA* ll. 1777-1823, 2193-2217, and 2962-2988). Despite their sadness, their mourning is marked by violence and vengeance, which is the reaction Jason expected from Bruce after his own death. Arthur’s violent mourning at the death of Sir Kayous is described as “manly in his melancholy” (l. 2204) and despite how Cador kisses Berille’s corpse, there is no rebuke for displaying emotion over the loss of a fellow knight.

Karras suggests that “[p]ublic emotion on the part of knights and great lords was not frowned upon, but indeed admired. Even tears were not unmanly; it was manly to have deeply held feelings, and important to display them,” but there were clearly limits to the extent to which grief was acceptably affected (Karras 65-6). Arthur’s response to Gawain’s death, according to his knights, crosses that line:

Then gliftes the good king / and glopins in herte,
Grones full grislich / with gretande teres,
Kneeles down to the corse / and caught it in armes,
Castes up his umbrere / and kisses him soon,
Looks on his eye-liddes / that locked were fair,

His lippes like to the lede / and his lire fallowed.

. . .

Then sweltes the sweet king / and in swoon falles,
Swafres up swiftly / and sweetly him kisses
Til his burlich berde / was bloody berunnen,
Als he had bestes brittened /and brought out of life;
Ne had Sir Ewain comen / and other grete lordes,
His bolde herte had bristen / for bale at that stounde! (*AMA* ll. 3949-54, 3969-74)
(The good king stares and dreadful in heart groans horribly with many tears,
kneels down to the corpse and catches it in his arms, casts up his face and kisses
him quickly, looks on his eyelids that were fairly closed, his lips like lead and his
fallowed flesh. . . . Then the sweet king becomes faint and fell in a swoon,
staggers up swiftly and sweetly kisses him until his burly beard ran with blood, as
if he had slain and taken the life from beasts; had Sir Ewain and other great lords
not come his bold heart would have burst because of that baleful time!)

Arthur grieves here in excess, covering himself in Gawain's blood and swooning, notably without following up with violence the way he, Cador, and Gawain did after Kayous, Berille, and Chastelayne died previously. Arthur's excessive display unaccompanied by vengeful violence is too much for his knights:

"Blinn," says these bold men, / thou blunders thyselfen!

This is no bootless bale, / for better bes it never!

It is no worship, iwis, / to wring thine handes;

To weep als a woman / it is no wit holden!

Be knightly of countenance, / als a king sholde

And leve such clamour, / for Cristes love of heven!” (ll. 3975-80)

(“Stop,” these bold men say, “you dishonor yourself! This is useless sorrow, it will never make it better! It is not honorable, certainly, to wring your hands; to weep as a woman is not prudent! Be knightly of countenance as a king should, and leave such noise, for Christ’s love of heaven!”)

Violence is the determining factor in these mourning scenes, and it is because Arthur mourns Gawain without violence that his knights rebuke him at all. To be knightly of countenance in this circumstance is to respond with violence, as Karras argues: “[i]n the late Middle Ages, violence was *the* mode of masculine expression within knighthood” (Karras 21).

At the climax of *Batman: Under the Red Hood*, Jason interrogates both Bruce’s ethics and the ways in which he mourns the deaths of his soldiers. Bruce thinks that Jason is angry because Bruce was unable to save him from the Joker: “I know I failed you,” he says. “But... I tried to save you, Jason. I’m trying to save you now” (Winick and Mahnke 303). Jason’s response, as Diamond notes, is unconcerned with Bruce’s inability to save him: “Is *that* what you think this is about? Your letting me die? I don’t know what clouds your judgment worse. Your guilt or your antiquated sense of morality. Bruce, I forgive you for not saving me. But why... Why on God’s earth—?! Is *he* still alive!?!?” (303). Jason reveals the Joker, the “he” in question, and Jason interrogates Bruce’s ethics, accusing him of a litany of injustices, and suggests that violent vengeance is a proper method of mourning: “If it had been you that he beat to a bloody mass. If it had been you that he left in agony. If he had taken *you* from this world[,] I would have done nothing

but search the planet for this pathetic pile of evil, death-worshipping garbage and sent him off to hell.”(306, see Figure 1.5). Bruce tells Jason that he does not understand, and Jason further interrogates him: “What? Your moral code just won’t allow for that? It’s too hard to ‘cross that line’?” (307), and we learn that Bruce’s moral code seems to mask a brutal underside to Bruce’s psyche:



Figure 1.5 - Jason explains how he would have mourned Bruce

No. *God* almighty ... No. It’d be too damned easy. All I have *ever* wanted to do is kill him. For *years* a day hasn’t gone by where I haven’t envisioned taking him... Taking him and spending an entire month putting him through the most horrendous, mind-boggling forms of torture. All of it building to an end with him broken, butchered and maimed... Pleading—*screaming*—in the worst kind of agony as he careens into a monstrous death. . . . I want him dead—maybe more than I’ve ever wanted anything. But if I do that, if I allow myself to go down into that place... I’ll never come back. (307-308)

Diamond notes the poignancy of Jason’s response, a simple question that stops Bruce’s explanation cold: “Why?” he asks. “Why do all the cub scouts in spandex *always* say

that?” (309). Jason elaborates, drawing ethical lines between other villains and the Joker. He names a laundry list of the Batman’s Rogues—Penguin, Scarecrow, Clayface, Riddler, Two Face—and places Joker at the pinnacle, the only one who should die. Diamond’s focus on this scene is in the lines Jason draws between various villains, following a Foucauldian line of reasoning in relation to crime and punishment. I would instead draw attention to the underlying reason for Jason’s ethical divisions, the only reason he separates the Joker from the other rogues: “I’m talking about *him*. Just him. And doing it because... *Because he took me away from you*” (309, emphasis added). Jason’s reasoning, it turns out, is that Bruce has not mourned him properly and has not visited violence on the Joker in retaliation for what Joker did to Jason.

Bruce’s lack of violent response in reaction to Jason’s death is exactly what Jason takes issue with in *Batman: Under the Red Hood*. Jason’s imploration that Bruce kill the Joker—his suggestion that Bruce should have long before things were able to escalate to a hostage situation—“because he took me away from you” is the crux of Jason’s interrogation of Bruce’s ethics. Masculine violence in the contemporary era, as in the late Middle Ages, is *the* proper manifestation of grief for Jason, and Bruce has failed to demonstrate his grief properly. Given that Bruce himself has demonstrated for Jason the ways in which masculine violence displaces complex affect—not only in his monologue on how much he would like to kill the Joker if only he could, but also in his willingness both to subdue Jason through violence and, ultimately, to risk killing Jason in order to save the Joker (312-313; see Figures 1.6 and 1.7)—it is no wonder that Jason fails to fully understand Bruce’s reasoning. Like Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bruce

has failed to play the game properly and has, like Arthur in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, mismanaged his grief.



Figure 1.6 – Bruce panics when Jason threatens to kill the Joker



Figure 1.7 – Bruce incapacitates Jason with a Batarang to the throat, saving the Joker

Stanbury's performative imagining plays a significant role in the processes these texts demonstrate as imperative in conduct instruction and the ways in which men learn to be men. Bruce's confession regarding what he would like to do to the Joker undercuts Langley's and DiGiovanna's implications that Jason's violent behavior is somehow essential to his character. Understanding Jason's experiences in line with those of Gawain and Arthur and his knights in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, it is far more likely that Jason saw Bruce's violent tendencies and desires and internalized them, and that his later experiences under the tutelage of Talia Al Ghul and various other mentors influenced the ways in which he processed what he learned with Bruce. His ability to interrogate Bruce's ethics in *Batman: Under the Red Hood* is the conclusion of the very same process visible in late medieval chivalric literature, and it is no surprise that he articulates a similar ethics to those found in *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Right masculinity in these texts is dependent on a particular understanding of masculine violence which mobilizes these types of heuristics in order to determine when and how violence is effective and beneficial.

In *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, Peter Middleton examines “comics for boys” to demonstrate the ways in which “action comics train boys in a code of manhood” in ways that are “certainly damaging because they offer false solutions to the difficulties of growing up” (Middleton 42). It is common to read the past into the present, especially in an analysis which positions itself as reading a “legacy,” as this thesis does. However, I would like to suggest that what Middleton has articulated in relation to modern action comics can simultaneously help us to understand the ways in which masculine violence is mobilized in late medieval chivalric literature for similar purposes. Middleton is particularly interested in how violence in action comics displaces the articulation of emotion: “In these comics, language is seemingly not available for conflict resolution; the best method is to smash your opponent. We might suspect therefore that the real motive for the violence is not the resolution of conflict at all, but the release of anger, because the fighting is apparently such a satisfactory means of emotional catharsis” (33). While Middleton’s focus will ultimately be on men’s abilities to articulate and manifest emotion, I argue that the same logic can be applied to manifestations of affect.

Affect, as I have argued here, is distinct from emotion in that it goes more-or-less unarticulated, while it may still become manifest through action. As Holly Crocker’s “Affective Politics in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*: ‘Cherl’ Masculinity after 1381” suggests,

affect in the late middle ages was “a ‘feminine’ trait” to be managed by men in order “to create categories of distinction for and within their communities,” specifically distinctions between different types of masculinities (Crocker 227). However, Crocker’s elaboration on instructional literatures in late medieval culture indicates that while affect may be a “‘feminine’ trait,” it was not necessarily believed to reside solely in the bodies of women. Affect was understood as a fundamental component of the soul in late medieval thought, but was aligned with femininity, while reason was aligned with masculinity (230). Both Crocker’s argument on “chivalric masculinity” and Middleton’s suggestion that comics promote the displacement of affect into violence (action) indicate that the *capacity* for affect exists in men and is managed through codes of masculinity visible in cultural productions, both in late medieval representation and in modern comic books. While modern readers might assume that the medieval past is more violent than the present and “insist on distinguishing the present, all the time, from a world of medieval alterity,” placing these cultural productions in dialogue together illuminates how they produce eerily similar lessons (Mills 12). These cross-temporal similarities suggest a persistence of ideas which troubles such distinctions between past and present. Further, culturally sanctioned affective masculine violence may simultaneously be a manifestation of culture’s desires for such violence, which suggests that the types of violence we sanction in our cultural productions and those reflected in the productions of the past—visible in the texts examined here—reflect a common cultural desire for alternate, violent methods of dealing with affect.

In *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*, L. O. Aranye Fradenburg suggests that “[w]e are so accustomed to pitting morality against desire that it

is simply hard to believe that morality is a form of desire, or desire is what morality is. Most of us prefer to think that we are split between restraint and passion” (Fradenburg 7). Bruce’s articulated “desire” to torture and kill the Joker, for instance, manifests this desire for morality: what Bruce actually desires *is not* to torture and kill the Joker, and his suggestion that “all [he] *ever* wanted to do is kill him” is a performative gesture to the type of masculinity he knows Jason expects as a manifestation of grief (Winick and Mahnke 307-308). However, just as Arthur’s performance of grief over Gawain’s corpse is undercut by his inability to enact vengeful violence in the wake of Gawain’s death, Bruce’s attempt to supplement masculine violence with an articulated impulse for violence that he actively resists is undercut by his willingness to lodge a weapon in Jason’s throat in order to save the Joker’s life instead. Arthur’s and Bruce’s attempts to manage affect without violence—like Gawain’s urge to flinch under the Green Knight’s axe—fail. In all instances, masculine violence proves itself to be *the* mode of managing affect for men, as eventually Arthur must fight and kill Mordred for killing Gawain and usurping his throne, Gawain must endure the blow from the Green Knight’s axe, and Bruce must take violent measures in order to end the conflict with Jason. That all of these instances inevitably end in violent acts by men suggests that culturally we expect—and, I argue, require—men to manage affect through violence and that there is no other alternative available in masculine codes of behavior.

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